RISE Innovation Lab February 10, 2020
Theory of Change (ToC) Overview

What is a Theory of Change (ToC)?

A Theory of Change (ToC) can serve as a blueprint for developing, implementing, and evaluating an innovation. ToC is not a general theory of how change happens; it explains how a specific innovation intends to bring about change and impact. Designing a ToC *starts* by identifying the intended impact and then working *backwards* to identify the preconditions, or activities, necessary to reach the long-term outcome (i.e. intended impact). There are different approaches to designing a ToC, but the process can be summarized by a series of steps:

Step 1: Identify the Long-Term Outcome (Intended Impact)—
the end goal of the innovation based on expected cumulative effect on a community or society (e.g. educational reform across the health sciences continuum)

Step 2a: Identify and Connect Mid-Term Outcomes—
changes that logically and directly arise from short-term outcomes or from other mid-term outcomes (e.g. changes in behavior or decision making)

Step 2b: Identify and Connect Short-Term Outcomes—
incremental changes or effects on participants/recipients that are logically connected to activities (e.g. changes in attitudes or skills)

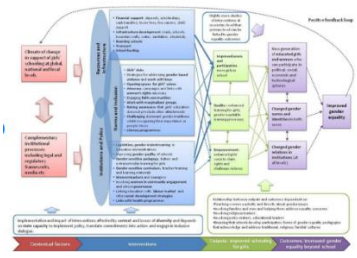
Step 3. Identify and Connect Activities to Short and/or Mid-Term Outcomes—
actions or interventions taken to reach participants or intended recipients of the education innovation (e.g. training program)

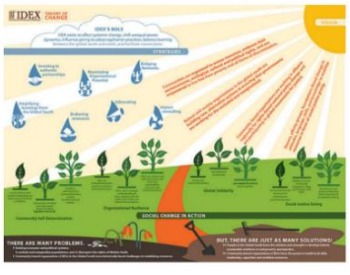
Step 4: Identify Outputs of Activities—
tangibles generated by innovation activities and/or products created by participants (e.g. attendance records)

Step 5: Identify Inputs—
key resources needed to support education innovation (e.g. staff, funding)

Step 6: Add Indicators to Outcomes—
observable or measurable signals of change (e.g. 95% of interns pass the in-training exam on the first attempt)

The end product of the ToC process is a visual model that represents *how* and *why* an innovation is expected to lead to impact. While the above steps can guide the process of designing a ToC, the ToC visual model they produce is often presented in a far less linear manner:





These images are intended to provide illustrative examples of the range in which ToC models can be presented.

Please direct questions to: Dr. Nikki Zaidi, RISE, Director for Evaluation and Assessment, bibler@med.umich.edu

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Why we need your contribution?
Theory of Change (ToC) is a *highly* participatory process that should involve a broad and diverse group of stakeholders—including intended recipients of the innovation and people external to the innovation to ascertain an 'outsider's' perspective. Stakeholders are invited to discuss and challenge one another's understanding of how change will happen (including assumptions) and what must hold true for the innovation to achieve its intended impact.

How can you contribute?
We invite you to contribute your perspective to help capture the complex and nuanced nature of innovation. We are asking you to listen to our innovators present their ToC models and then provide them with feedback. All feedback is appreciated, but we encourage you to offer suggestions for improving the ToC—rather than simply identifying shortcomings. Below are some guiding questions you might consider when structuring your feedback:

- What additional activities might lead to the outcomes indicated in the ToC model?
- What additional measurable, credible signals of change (e.g. metrics) could be added in the ToC?
- Is there current or published work in this content area that has already established any of the causal links for how and why change is expected in this field? If so, can you suggest possible existing evidence or research to explore?
- Are there other possible unintended impact(s)—either positive or negative—not depicted by the ToC?
- Does the ToC address one or multiple levels (e.g. individuals, organization, societal) of change and impact? If the focus is on a single level of change, how might this be broadened?

Where can I learn more about Theory of Change?
Two online resources that provide good orientation to ToC include:

- Center for Theory of Change. Setting standards for theory of change. https://www.theoryofchange.org/library/. Accessed January 9, 2020
- Grantcraft. Using a theory of change to guide planning and evaluation. http://grantcraft.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/12/theory_change.pdf. Accessed January 9, 2020

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